

How To Be A Safety Star^a

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Introduction

Robert E. Kelley describes in his book, *How To Be A Star Work At Work: Nine Breakthrough Strategies You Need To Succeed*^b, a study conducted at Bell Labs to determine what differentiates star performers from other workers. His results showed that so-called stars were not easily distinguished from other workers based on a wide variety of test results. Rather, the differences he finally found related to how the stars performed their jobs: it was not what they knew, but rather how they used what they knew.

Kelley was able to identify nine breakthrough strategies that separated stars from other performers: Initiative, Networking, Self-Management, Perspective, Followership, Leadership, Teamwork, Organizational Savvy, and Show-and-Tell. Odds are most successful safety professionals are already familiar with and using many of these strategies. Yet Kelley found that stars understood these strategies differently than other workers. Initiative, for example, might mean developing something needed to improve your ability to do your job better, although stars identify initiative to mean developing something needed to improve the ability of coworkers or the organization to be more successful. Most importantly, Kelley found that professionals could learn and develop these strategies to improve their ability to be more productive and successful.

The purpose of this presentation is to review and build on Robert Kelley's findings with specific application to the safety professional: what are the nine work strategies, how are they understood and used by successful safety professionals, and how can they be used to increase worker effectiveness and efficiency? The emphasis will be on application for safety professionals who face increasingly heavy workloads, based on personal experience and feedback from coworkers who have used these strategies to improve their personal productivity and career success.

Background

The contributions of safety professionals can be highly rewarding. Serious injuries, catastrophic incidents, environmental harm, major property damage, and significant business loss can be prevented, contributing to overall business excellence and sustainability. There can be many challenges as well. Safety professionals often have many technical competencies to master, have heavy workloads, and may find that the demands of their work can be relatively stressful. Strategies

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^b The authors acknowledge and appreciate permission from Prof. Kelley to discuss his work¹ in this paper.

that can help safety professionals be more productive can help promote career satisfaction and security, provide work / life balance, and help improve organizational safety.

Robert E. Kelley, in his book *How To Be A Star At Work*¹, investigated what factors made some workers highly productive or star performers at Bell Labs, part of Lucent Technologies. Kelley, a professor at the Carnegie Mellon University, was interested in developing technical tools to help employees and organizations improve productivity in order to help create long-term competitive advantage. In order to better identify factors associated with highly productive workers, Kelley studied various cognitive (e.g., reasoning, creativity), personality (e.g., self-confidence, risk-taking), and social (e.g., interpersonal skills, leadership ability) factors through testing and interviews with workers and managers to understand what differentiates star performers and other workers.

The initial result from this study was that there were no significant differences in cognitive, personality, social, and environmental factors between star and other employees. Further study, though, showed that:

It wasn't what these stars had in their heads that made them standouts from the pack, it was how they used what they had. . . . Star performers do their work very differently than the solid, average performing pack¹."

In particular, Kelley was able to identify nine work strategies or behaviors that star performers used effectively to increase their individual productivity. By training employees on these strategies, he was able to demonstrate significantly improved worker and organizational productivity. For safety professionals, possibly overloaded with work and pressed for time, an introduction to these strategies may help improve productivity and contribute to overall organizational safety performance. It could also lead to more leisure time or opportunity for advancement. Odds are that you already have some or all of these skills at some level to have been successful as a safety professional. Understanding that star performers *look* at these strategies differently, though, can be a source of potential professional development and improved productivity.

Nine Work Strategies

Every job requires a certain level of cognitive ability, such as analytical thinking and the abilities to plan and learn quickly, and technical knowledge, such as a basic understanding of required job competencies. For safety professionals, some examples of these requirements may include²:

- Collecting and analyzing data
- Recognizing trends and patterns
- Developing strategies for continuous improvement
- Understanding applicable laws and regulations
- Learning safety-related principles and procedures.

To be an effective safety professional, of course, you need to know something about safety and also have basic work skills. In addition to these core needs, however, the nine work strategies identified by Kelley that help distinguish between star performers and other workers are¹:

Initiative – Going above and beyond the job description for the benefit of the organization

Networking – Finding routes to knowledge experts who can help solve problems quickly

Self-Management – Directing work activities and career choices to help ensure high job performance

Perspective – Seeing projects and problems through the eyes of customers to develop better solutions

Followership – Focusing on helping the organization succeed by working cooperatively with the organization's leaders

Teamwork – Actively participating in group goal setting, commitments, activities, and accomplishments

Leadership – Using expertise and influence to convince a group of people to accomplish a substantial task

Organizational Savvy – Navigating competing interests in the organization to address conflict and promote cooperation

Show-and-Tell – Selecting the right information to communicate and developing persuasive presentations

While many of these work strategies already seem familiar, recall that Kelley's study indicated that they may have different meanings for star performers, requiring further clarification. For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen to group these work strategies, as shown below (somewhat differently than the grouping used by Kelley):

Intrapersonal Strategies – Initiative, Self-Management

Networking Strategies - Networking, Perspective

Team Strategies – Followership, Teamwork, Leadership

Organizational Strategies – Organizational Savvy, Show-and-Tell

Each of these groups will be further discussed with possible applications for safety professional below.

Intrapersonal Strategies

We have grouped Initiative and Self-Management as the Intrapersonal Strategies. Star initiative, as defined by Kelley, requires¹:

- Seeking out responsibility above and beyond your job description
- Undertaking extra efforts for the benefit of coworkers or the larger group
- Sticking tenaciously to an idea or project and following it through to successful implementation
- Assuming some personal risk in taking on new responsibilities.

It's not enough to do your job and do it well; star performance requires that you expand your job description by doing things not normally done in your role, especially when done for the benefit of

coworkers or the overall organization. Activities that make it possible to do your job better or easier, while often needed, are not star strategies. Organizing your files, for example, to make it easier to access information such as safety audits, incidents, or other records may not normally be star behavior because it is probably within your normal job description and also primarily benefits yourself.

One example of initiative might be attending a conference, learning about ISO 14001 Environmental Management Systems, and then introducing and championing introduction of ISO 14001 to help drive continuous improvement at your company. Some other examples of initiative for safety professionals include:

“It was very important everyone fully understood the safety implications of the new machines. The manual was unreadable, and as I had soon discovered, inaccurate. So I used my prior knowledge to devise a training course dealing with the real safety implications².”

“It was clear people were interpreting the regulations as to when protective clothing was required differently from area to area. . . So I rewrote the regs for each area in their terminology using their layouts, products, activities, to bring point home².”

The concept of Self-Management is a well-known requirement for successful work productivity. As Kelley quotes a star performer, stars are constantly evaluating their activities and working to make good choices on how to use their time:

“I first thought I was productive because I got through all the items on my to-do list each day. Then one day I realized that I wasn’t sure how things ended up on my list¹.”

Stars manage their time to work on projects tied to the “critical path,” the activities that are inherently value-adding and lead to delighted customers for their products or services. In essence, star performers try only to work on activities that will provide the greatest value to their organizations, helping them to better target the initiatives they may undertake, as discussed above. By focusing their efforts, star performers seek high productivity where it adds the most value, not just to complete a long list of tasks or to be busy. Often, this requires the ability to say “no” to avoid too many commitments, where possible, and avoiding various timewasters. Stars are also constantly thinking about new ideas or anticipating new projects in order to be ready for the next value-added activity.

Self-Management is, of course, a critical area for safety professionals due to long to-do lists that naturally develop as a result of injuries, incidents, audits, safety meetings, and other day-to-day safety-related tasks. It’s also often very difficult to say “no.” However, the more that safety professionals can focus on how they can add the most value to their companies, the better they can prioritize their activities and organize their days, targeting their initiative to increase personal productivity and benefit the safety of the organization.

Networking Strategies

We have grouped Networking and Perspective as the Networking Strategies. With the sometimes overwhelming amount of information and potential problems that workers face today, something that safety professionals can readily relate to, it is impossible to know everything you might need to know to solve every problem you encounter. Having access to a network of professionals therefore becomes critical. As Kelley notes:

“Networking, more than any other skill in the star performer model, can have dramatic impact on the speed, quality, and quantity of your output. Without a high-quality network, you are unlikely to become a star performer. With one securely in place, you can leverage your knowledge base and give it a tremendous boost¹.”

While you may want to have all the answers to all the questions, it’s simply not possible. And yet the problems must still be solved. The answer for star performers is to have access to a broad group of experts with expertise in a variety of areas, who are often connected to other networks of their own.

While most employees have networks available to them, star networks stand-out due to the overall quality of network experts and the speed in which responses are obtained. Participation in star networks is usually earned by having expertise yourself that the network values and by achieving credibility through past actions. While a certain amount of time is usually provided by most experts, especially within a company, the amount of time and the speed of response can vary significantly based on your standing within the network. It’s therefore important to view participation in high-quality networks as an essential activity and to understand proper network etiquette, such as working to avoid wasting people’s time by conscientiously doing your homework before contacting them. Star performers proactively build and participate in networks before they need them.

Networks can be large or small, formal or informal. In DuPont, our corporate safety networks generally meet in person twice a year and several times a year by teleconference to work on common objectives and to leverage safety-related skills and knowledge. Participants in these network meetings typically represent large business units, geographic regions, manufacturing sites, or leveraged safety and engineering groups. Each participant also usually represents a business unit safety network, as shown in Figure 1, greatly expanding the reach of the corporate safety networks. These networks provide excellent resources for sharing information, leveraging activities, and providing resources when needed.

Large networks like these are excellent sources for solving problems, but they usually must be supplemented by additional personal networks. Often, the difference may be that large and formal networks may be based on position, rather than expertise. Star networks are always based on expertise.

An example, showing a path followed to solve one recent safety-related design issue on a project, is shown in Figure 2. Developed and used properly, networks can expand the problem-solving power and knowledge of any safety professional, contributing to greater productivity and career success. Some other examples include:

“I needed some real help to get everyone on board, plus I was floundering a little myself. It may have been a little unorthodox, but I knew a colleague and friend at another company had successfully worked through a similar issue. So I called her and asked if she’d spend a few hours in one-on-one meetings. . . It worked. It wasn’t me saying it, but someone else who had done it. Our eventual solution was different than hers, but it really got things going².”

“I’d cultivated relationships with the regulators in the state and at the national level and with many of my colleagues throughout. . . and in other companies. . . I could usually use my network to find a precedent somewhere that would be in line with my interpretation².”

Networks can be an important source of information for the next star strategy, which is Perspective. This strategy requires getting the big picture of what is going on around you in and outside of your company, where your activities fit in, and ultimately how you can add value through your work. When planning new projects or trying to better understand and prioritize current projects, it's essential to gain different perspectives that can help you critically determine the value of your work and your approaches for driving continuous improvement.

Important activities for gaining perspective include:

- using your networks to talk to experts both within and outside your areas of expertise
- seeking new learning opportunities, such as training course, conferences, etc.
- reviewing what's worked on successful projects and analyzing mistakes and missed opportunities to capture learnings
- gaining input from colleagues, customers, competitors, and corporate management.

Figure 1 – A Corporate Safety Network

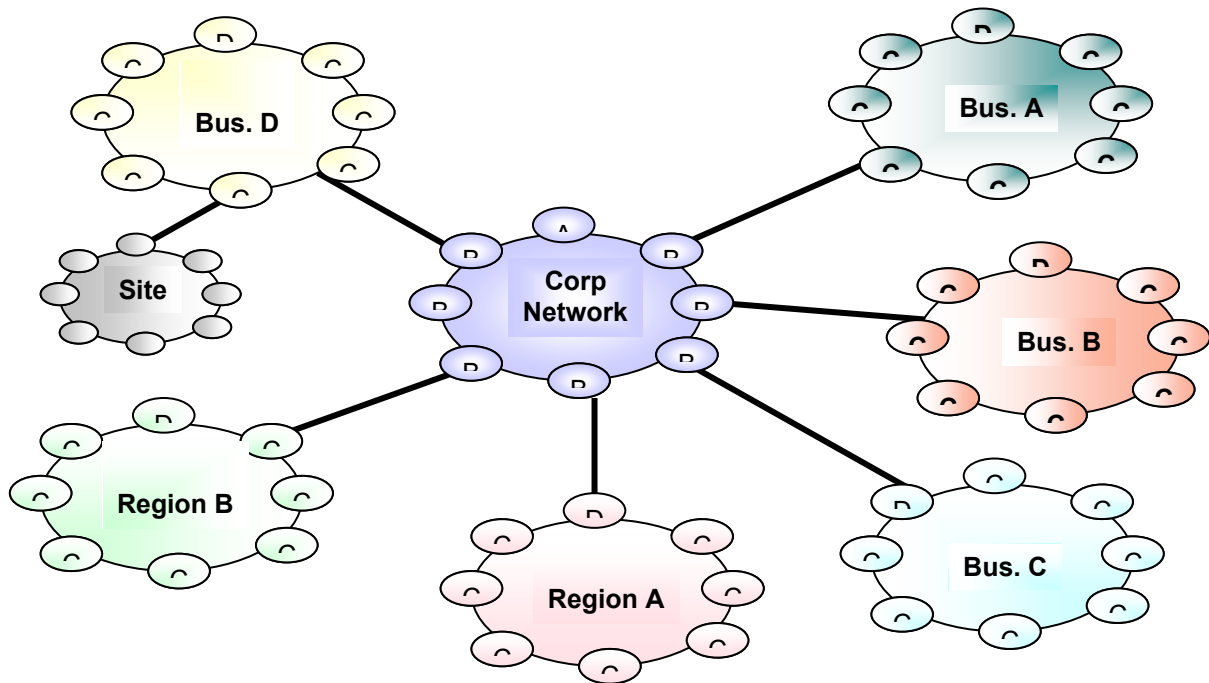
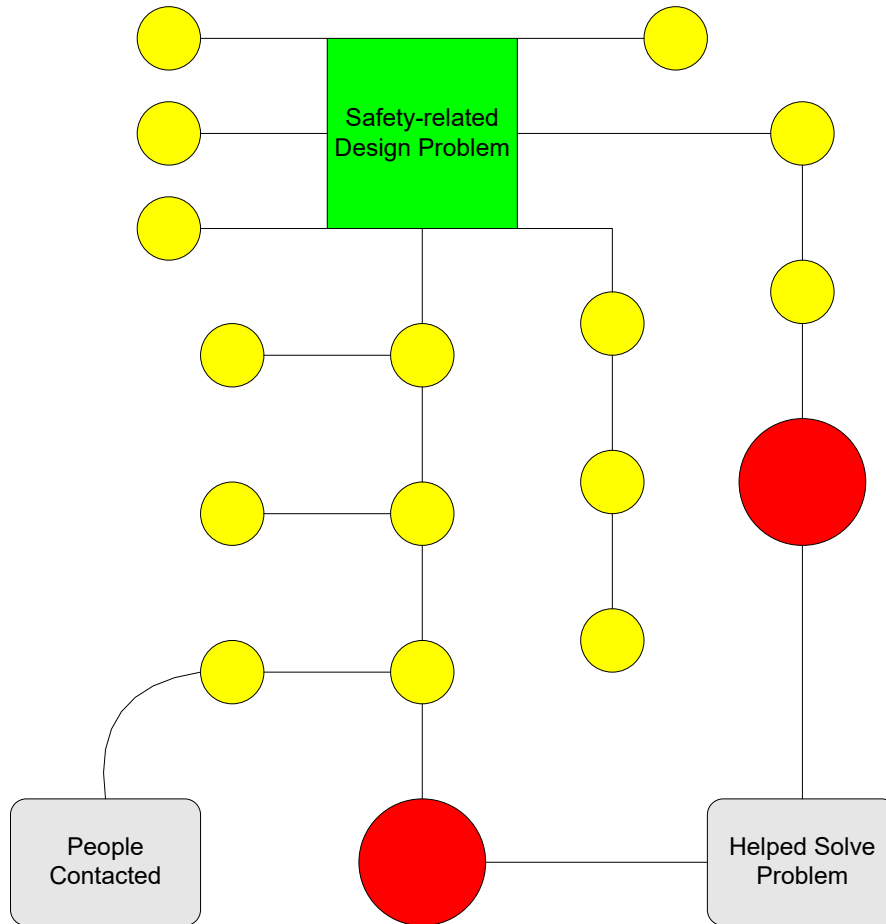


Figure 2 – Networking to Solve a Problem



The result can be better targeting of work activities to add the most value, smarter priority setting, recognition of patterns affecting your performance, and creative problem-solving. An example of gaining perspective is:

“There were a lot of people who needed to be involved and they all had a different point of view. . . My job was to recognize they all had potentially conflicting interests and to involve them in a solution that met all of their needs, at least in part, and would work².”

Team Strategies

We have grouped Followership, Leadership, and Teamwork as the Team Strategies. Work is increasingly done in teams, so understanding and being good at working in teams is required in the workplace today. This is certainly true for safety professionals, who are often staff personnel who must work closely with wage roll, exempt, and management employees in influence roles. In many cases, safety professionals lead teams to help improve safety performance, and in other cases, safety professionals serve as team members, perhaps to ensure that safety is considered in project work. In

both situations, you must know how to work effectively in teams to get work done and to increase your personal productivity.

Kelley defines Followership as “the ability to work cooperatively with a leader to accomplish the organization’s goals. . . .” Followers, in this sense, are team members who are technical or function leaders who work with line managers to achieve specific goals. While many employees may meet this definition, star performers are distinguished by independent thinking and active involvement in working towards company goals. Kelley notes:

“Workers in this category never stop thinking for themselves. They do not follow blindly, but when they disagree with the leader, they do so constructively and with their organization’s best interest at heart.”

Average performers may more simply do as they are told, stick to their job descriptions, and avoid potential conflict with management. Some characteristics of star performers include¹:

- Commitment and a vision beyond short-term personal gains
- Competence and credibility to gain personal influence
- Honesty and conscience in carrying out assignments
- Controlled disagreement when differences in approach or priority are present.

The complement to Followership is “Small I” Leadership, based on influence among peers and teams. This type of leadership is not based on position or title, but rather on the credibility that technical or organizational expertise, reputation, and influence skills provide. Many safety professionals fit this role when leading company teams or working with their management as functional leaders. To be effective leaders, star performers must achieve credibility in at least one of three areas¹:

- Knowledge – functional expertise and proven judgment
- People-Skills – caring about, listening to, and not assuming you know everything about other people, including providing credit for other team member contributions
- Momentum – focus on leadership activities that will help the team achieve their goals, including helping with prioritization and planning, involving all team members, and promoting effective team communication.

When it comes to the Teamwork strategy, star performers are careful to join teams wisely. Star performers focus on where they can add the most value to the organization, maximizing their contribution to teams and to the organization. Because of this and their skills as team members, star performers are in high demand to participate on many teams and must choose carefully, when possible. Star performers evaluate if team activities are closely connected to the critical path, adding value to the ultimate customers of their products or services. They also determine if team activities are clear and achievable and if their participation is value adding to the efforts of the team. Once star performers commit to participate on a team, they focus on making significant contributions to the team effort, including¹:

- Making sure the team knows its purpose
- Getting the team work done on time, on schedule, and on budget
- Paying attention and contributing to group dynamics.

Safety professionals may not always have the ability or desire to choose which teams they participate on. By carefully considering if teams are truly adding value via clear and achievable goals, they can work to help prioritize their workloads to the most value-adding activities where they can make the greatest contribution to the team effort. If the value being added by the team is unclear, maybe a team is not needed. If the safety professional can't make a significant contribution to the team, maybe their participation is not needed. Participation on teams, of course, is the way work gets done in most large organizations today. Safety professionals must know and understand how to be effective team leaders and effective team members if they are to be successful. Some examples include:

"I realized that they and I had a lot to gain from working together, so I really worked to get to know them. By the time I proposed a work team, they were friends and they readily joined²." (good example)

"I knew nothing else would work. So, when the other team members didn't agree, I went over their heads²." (bad example)

Organizational Strategies

We have grouped Organizational Savvy and Show-and-Tell as the Organizational Strategies. Since safety professionals do much of their work through influence management, good organizational skills are critical. Kelley defines Organizational Savvy as "the ability to manage competing workplace interests to promote an idea, resolve conflicts, and most important, to achieve a goal¹." Many of the earlier star strategies come together in Organizational Savvy, as star performers work to promote and champion their ideas and projects in the overall organization and potentially bump into various roadblocks. Successfully navigating these roadblocks by understanding organizational culture and politics is an important skill required to help ensure that the value-added activities stars work on are allowed to proceed and be completed. Safety professionals often hit roadblocks associated with costs, personnel needs, interpretation of standards and regulations, etc., which can delay or stop potential safety-related activities. Navigating these roadblocks through development of various strategies and alternatives coupled with persuasion and an understanding of how to work in the organization is essential. In particular, building the business case for safety programs and improvements helps to underscore the value of safety in terms more easily understood by the entire organization.

Some of the strategies observed in star performers by Kelley include¹:

- Understanding how things are really done (get the lay of the land)
- Finding a mentor
- Managing conflict successfully
- Creating a niche of expertise
- Developing credibility.

Use of personal networks to both develop perspective on the organization and on possible approaches to successfully navigating organizational roadblocks can be key. Some examples of Organizational Savvy include:

“Demonstrating the risk associated with the options was key. I first had to show why the minimum standard option was high risk for all concerned. Then I had to further quantify the strictest interpretation and why the risk level associated with that option actually trebled the cost for only a marginal gain in risk-related benefit, as compared to the option I was advocating².”

“The Safety Coordinators couldn’t seem to get the commitment we needed and neither could I. So I called a meeting of everyone involved, listened to all their beefs, and then enrolled them. I asked them what to do and how to do it. It took a lot of time, but it was worth it. They all solved the problem for me and it literally went away².”

Kelley also warns about the “tech-spec wreck” where there is a built-in bias in the organization against workers who are known more for their technical specialization rather than for their ability to work well within the organization. This can potentially be a problem for many safety professionals, who by the nature of their work, possess specialized knowledge of safety regulations and practices that may not be well-known throughout the rest of the organization. While specialization is often necessary for dealing with the many tasks undertaken by safety professionals, this specialization can also be harmful if organizational savvy for working within the organization is lacking. Practice on the nine star strategies can certainly help with this problem, as can periodically considering the following questions¹⁶:

- What should I be demonstrating to this organization that I’m not currently demonstrating?
- What kind of image do I present to decision makers, coworkers, and customers?

Show-and-Tell is the final star strategy and is probably a familiar one for most safety professionals. The ability to communicate information clearly and interestingly to help influence the organization is important, especially since so much training and presentation is typically associated with safety positions. Good communication skills are always helpful in presenting a good image, building credibility, and being able to persuade others to your viewpoint. As Kelley notes, while poor communication skills can “limit effectiveness within the larger organization¹,” good communication skills cannot make-up for problems with the other star strategies:

“No amount of skill in written and oral communication can make-up for your lack of basic ability in the other work skills or in the proficiency required in your job¹.”

Obviously, communication skills must be built on the foundation provided by the other strategies presented in this paper. Safety professionals will clearly be limited if they do not focus on and develop good communication skills. Some suggestions provided by Kelley include¹:

- Know your audience and target your message appropriately
- Make your message relevant and interesting
- Use human terms, where possible, rather than technical or regulatory terms
- Use props to enhance training when they will not detract from your message.

Some examples of good Show-and-Tell include:

“I knew the class would fall asleep if they had to hear a lecture about safety and safety procedures one more time. So I designed a session where they had responsibility for analyzing what was needed to make things more safe for them. . . This would establish enough credibility for me to drive home a few features I wanted them to learn².”

"I knew training in the past had been technical and canned. . . but when actually training I used their language to name my points²."

Summary

Safety professionals are extremely busy, like many workers today, and are often overloaded with too much to do. Responsibilities can be broad, but the benefits of high productivity can be improved safety performance, fewer injuries, and higher career satisfaction and success. Working on the star strategies presented in this paper has been demonstrated to help improve worker productivity and could possibly make a difference in your career. Focusing on all nine star strategies and working conscientiously on them over time can and should help make you a safety star. It's never too late to get started.

References

- 1 Kelley, Robert E., *How To Be A Star At Work: Nine Breakthrough Strategies You Need to Succeed*. New York: Times Business, Random House, 1998.
- 2 DuPont, *Competencies That Distinguish Superior Performance for Safety, Health, and Environmental Professionals*. 1994